Client Satisfaction Report for B.C. Ministry of Forests Forest Science Program

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Forest Science Program

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1.0 Background and methods

In August 2002, FORREX-Forest Research Extension Partnership was commissioned by the Ministry of Forests Research Branch to assist the Branch in establishing a baseline measure of client satisfaction regarding services and products of the Forest Science Program as required under the provincial Budget Transparency and Accountability Act. The study was designed to gather perspectives on the performance of the Forest Science Program from its clientele, which is defined as B.C. Ministry of Forests (MOF) district and regional staff, (referred to as "region-based" staff) as well as MOF staff in Victoria (referred to as "Victoria-based" staff).

A qualitative method using interviews with "key informants" was selected for the study. FORREX was asked to conduct 10 telephone interviews with pre-selected clients of the Ministry of Forests Forest Science Program (FSP). Six clients from each of the six Forest Regions, three clients from three Branches (Timber Supply, Forest Practices, Tree Improvement), and a representative from the Chief Forester's Office were interviewed.

In addition to the qualitative data, each interviewee provided a quantitative score for overall satisfaction. The interviewees rated their level of satisfaction at an average of "7" on a scale of "10".

The study focused on the following satisfaction criteria (interview questions are found in the Appendix):

a. General satisfaction with Forest Science Program
b. How closely information generated from FSP meets client expectations
c. Ease of accessibility of information from FSP
d. Timeliness of responses to requests for information
e. Client reliance on FSP
f. Flexibility/adaptability of FSP
g. Credibility of FSP information
h. Importance of FSP to the mission of the Ministry of Forests
i. Suggestions for improvements

During September 2002, Research Branch Director Henry Benskin submitted a letter of introduction to Forest Practices, Tree Improvement and Timber Supply Branch

directors, the Chief Forester, and six Regional Managers with a list of interview questions and a request for designated interviewees. Shawn Morford, FORREX Socio-Economics Extension Specialist, conducted interviews between September 18 and October 10, 2002 with selected Victoria-based and region-based representatives. Interviews with Victoria-based representatives were conducted in person, while others were conducted by telephone. In some cases, district-based personnel served as spokespersons for their regions. Interviews ranged from 40 minutes to 1.25 hours.

We asked interviewees for their own perspectives as well a sense of how others in their units may also perceive the work of the FSP. When interviewees spoke on behalf others in their units, we asked for evidence (such as conversations, memos, or actions) that might help illustrate how the perception was seen among others. One region-based interviewee had conducted a staff meeting to collect responses from those in his unit prior to the interview.

At the beginning of each interview, we provided assurances of confidentiality and anonymity and explained the role of each interviewee as a key informant for their units. Most interviewees had seen a copy of the questions and were prepared with responses.

2.0 Scope and limitations of the study

In most cases, Victoria-based interviewees limited their responses to information on Branch activities because of an apparent lack of exposure to the regional research teams, while region-based interviewees generally responded to questions as they related to their own regional research teams because of apparent lack of exposure to Branch research activities.

Interviewing key informants is a common qualitative data collection method for gaining insight on human perspectives, however, it is most effective when the interviewer has the ability to reach additional interviewees in cases where selected interviewees can only give partial information. Given budgetary and time constraints, however, this study was limited to the original 10 selected interviews.

A quantitative score was obtained by asking each interviewee to provide a numerical score regarding their level of satisfaction with the Forest Sciences Program. and by averaging individual scores. Quantitative data in this study have severely limited reliability because respondents were not randomly selected and the sample was extremely small. In addition, two of 10 respondents chose to give separate scores for

two levels of the Forest Science Program, and those scores were averaged. Although a single numerical average was obtained for this measure, the score is not a reliable indicator of the general level of satisfaction of clients for the Forest Sciences Program because of these limitations.

This methodology was selected because of restricted budget and time that did not allow for a full quantitative project. To obtain quantitative results would require us to identify and collect a population database from which to draw a random sample, and to develop, test, and administer a questionnaire, and analyse the results. The qualitative process provides more in-depth information than a quantitative study, but "trades off" breadth for depth of information. To provide reliable results about client satisfaction would require selection of a random sample of the total population of clients.

The Forest Science Program expects to use the findings as a baseline against which they will measure progress over time. To get accurate follow-up data, it will be most desirable to interview the same individuals during the next phase of data collection; however if those individuals are not available because of reassignment, retirement, or other reasons, making confident comparisons will be more difficult.

Despite these limitations, results of these interviews should provide some valuable feedback regarding the level of satisfaction and recommendations for improvement that Forest Science Program administrators can use over the next year.

3.0 Findings

Responses to the interview questions varied significantly depending on whether the interviewee was Victoria-based or not, rendering the study almost two distinct studies – one to report on satisfaction of clients of the Victoria-based Forest Science Program and another to report on satisfaction of clients of regional research sections. In many cases, region-based interviewees did not appear to consider themselves direct clients of the Victoria-based researcher, and visa versa. All recognized the link between the regional and Victoria-based programs, but most only expressed confidence in responding to questions about their local research group. For instance, one region-based interviewee was not certain about the name of the leader of the Research Branch in Victoria. Another region-based interviewee expressed uncertainty about the exact nature of the clientele of the Victoria-based program.

Only one region-based interviewee expressed dissatisfaction with the distinction between headquarters and region-based programs. The interviewee said that they would not feel comfortable calling Victoria and wouldn't know who to call.

"I would like to know more about the research that is more provincial in nature. I would like them (headquarters researchers) to stop in at the districts more—let us know and we will set up a seminar."

To most other region-based interviewees, however, the distinction was not considered a problem.

"Headquarters researchers focus on policy and broader issues, and our regional team focuses on operational issues. That works for me. I like the model."

3.1 Variability and direction of responses

The table below provides a summary of the variability and direction of responses to questions regarding each of the satisfaction criteria. It is important to note that a "0" mark means high variability, not a "zero mark."

"+" means overall positive response, with low level of variability among interviewees. More than one "+" means that there was an enthusiastically positive response to questions relating to this criterion.

"0" means some positive, some negative responses (high level of variability among interviewees)

"-" means overall negative response, with low level of variability among interviewees. More than one "-" means that there was an enthusiastically negative response to questions relating to this criterion.

Satisfaction criteria	Regional Forest Science Program as perceived by region-based interviewees	Headquarters Forest Science Program as perceived by Victoria-based interviewees
General satisfaction with Forest Sciences Program (FSP)	0	0
How closely information accessed from FSP meets client expectations	0	0

Ease of accessibility of information from FSP	0	0
Timeliness of responses to requests for information	+	+
Level of client reliance on FSP	0	+
Flexibility/adaptability of FSP	0	–
Credibility of FSP information	+ +	+ +
Importance of FSP to the mission of the Ministry of Forests	+ +	+ +

One interview question asked respondents to provide a score between 1 and 10 (1 representing the "lowest score" and 10 representing the "highest score") to rate their individual level of general satisfaction with the Forest Sciences Program. The average response was 7.1. In two cases, respondents rated their satisfaction with the Victoria-based Forest Science Program separately from the Regional-based Forest Science Program, so those scores were averaged before being averaged with the others' individual scores. The range of responses was 5 (8 was the highest and 3 was the lowest).

3.2 Region-based responses regarding the Regional Forest Sciences Program

a. General satisfaction

Region-based interviewees who had regular contact with the regional research teams spoke positively about their work. Most felt that they played a valuable role, and that staff members were generally satisfied with the teams' contributions. Some interviewees felt that the regional research teams' specialized expertise used in emergencies such as landslides was their most immediate and relevant contribution to their work. One interviewee did not have much contact with the research program.

Most region-based interviewees had very little specific knowledge about the Victoria-based Forest Science program, except that they believed that the Victoria-based Program was focused more on provincial issues and that they felt that it played an important role provincially.

One manager acknowledged that the regional research teams have been hard-hit with budget cuts and that they are struggling as a result of reduced capacity. Despite this, however, the client seemed generally satisfied with the results of research work, with the exception of lack of research needed on wildlife. Several interviewees discussed whether or not researchers should get involved in making management recommendations, and opinions were mixed.

"Some researchers are hesitant to give recommendations, and that frustrates me. They know enough about the factors to make these recommendations. I would trust their recommendations."

This contrasts with a comment from a Victoria-based interviewee who did not think researchers should be involved in management:

"Some researchers try to go beyond giving us the information into recommendations."

b. How closely information generated from FSP meets client expectations

Expectations were generally met, with a few exceptions. In one case where there was perceived to be little interaction between regional research teams and the district, the manager admitted that the district shares some of the responsibility.

"Our limited interaction isn't necessarily the fault of the research section. Our people aren't forced to become aware of what research is doing. We do have some concern that we are not seeing the results of what is being done, but we get so much paper coming through here that things don't get read."

Another said, *"I have never looked at the (regional research) website, to be honest."*

One interviewee said that they believed that the Forest Sciences Program overall is more operationally relevant than 10 years ago, because *"it offers more short-term*

relevant results." Another said that expectations were a problem; when funding is high, expectations are high, and when funding decreases, expectations remain at the same level.

c. Ease of accessibility of information from FSP

Responses regarding accessibility of information varied among regions. Some interviewees expressed ease in getting information through Extension notes and presentations, while another felt that reduced personal contact that previously existed between districts and regional scientists has affected their ability to access information. Some interviewees pointed to the "personal factor" as being related to the accessibility; when researchers have a physical presence among districts, research seem to be considered more accessible.

In some cases, interviewees felt dissatisfied that one geographic area within a region was favoured by researchers in response to "hot spots."

"Do more road shows, let us know what you are doing. Have regional research section work plan approved at the RMT level. Would like more contact in general with researchers. "

In another case,

"Accessibility is high in our region. These people (researchers) get out and do presentations. They do field trips and are open to coming out to the district."

d. Timeliness of responses to requests for information

Most interviewees who had regular interaction with researchers were satisfied about timeliness of requests for information, particularly in response to environmental damage.

"It depends on the issue. When there is an emergency where there has been damage, they are out there the next day."

One other interviewee felt that the interaction between the district and regional research team was limited and stressed that the timeliness question was not as relevant as the lack of interaction. *"Timeliness? I would maybe say yes, if we knew who to contact."*

e. Level of client reliance on FSP

Districts and regions appear to rely heavily on regional scientists for their technical expertise. Interviewees valued the fact that scientists were available when

specialized knowledge was needed. Interviewees gave several examples where researchers came to the field to examine landslides and other incidents.

Reliance on regional research teams for their research work was less clear. Perceptions of reliance for research varied some within regions as well as among regions. Some districts that had high public interests relied more on the research team than districts that had less public attention. One interviewee described the reliance as "moderate."

One region-based interviewee said that this interview helped them think about the role of the research team, and that it *"made me realize how little we use the research section or have contact with them."*

"Generally, research is not on people's radar screens (at the district). We tend to be more reactive when it comes to research."

f. Flexibility/adaptability of FSP

Responses about flexibility and adaptability varied among regions. One interviewee pointed to the fact that their regional advisory committee was not active and felt that there had not been adequate opportunities for feedback to researchers about research priorities. Others blamed budget cuts for reduced ability of districts to provide input to the research agenda.

One interviewee stated that they depend on (and prefer) researchers to select research priorities based on the researchers' knowledge of issues, not what operational staff identify for them, stating, *"we don't have a list of research gaps in our back pockets."*

Several interviewees emphasized the need for some shorter-term results. *"Long-term research is o.k., but needs to be salted with short-term interim results for relevance. We wouldn't be able to sell the idea of long-term projects without the shorter-term results along the way. "*

g. Credibility of FSP

Credibility of science in the Forest Science Program overall was perceived to be high among all interviewees. There was general agreement in the confidence regarding

the reliability and validity of the research results and a belief the scientists have very good international reputations. One interviewee added,

"I have seen them at meetings fending off even the most skeptical folks. This is important because it lends credibility with the ENGOs and public. We can say that the issues are being addressed using good science."

h. Importance of FSP to the mission of the Ministry of Forests

All interviewees spoke of the importance of having internal research capacity within the Ministry of Forests. All favoured in-house researchers as opposed to relying on other research organizations to cover research needs. Interviewees pointed to the ability of in-house research teams to respond to information gaps that relate to policy, as well as the ability of district and regional priorities to be reflected in the research agenda.

Several interviewees spoke of the potential for increased importance of research in the future and one suggested that a percentage of the ministry budget be set aside for research to stabilize the program.

"With the results-based code and decisions being 'science-based' we will need even more research capacity, not less. We don't want our research capacity vulnerable to the whims of outside funding. Integrate it fully into the Ministry's core business."

One interviewee spoke of the need for a cultural shift in the research program in response to the results-based Forest Practices Code.

"Ideally, researchers should have a 50-50 split between research and effectiveness monitoring."

"To accomplish the MOF mandate, we need research. We value them around. Although we could hire consultants, MOF regional researchers know the issues, the areas, the backgrounds, and the history."

i. Suggestions for improvements

The following recommendations are listed in the words of the region-based interviewees.

- Focus more on range management. Most issues researched now are about trees, not other resources.
- Need more research information on wildlife.
- Continue to manage the research installations – Mesachie Lake and Kalamalka.

- Maintain the existing training facilities – they are good for public/community relations and for sharing information.
- Research section should work closely with the new district stewardship positions – this could be a good link between research and districts.
- More applied research. Make sure we are doing continuous improvement.
- Talk to us (at district). We can tell you how we want to get information.
- Have research section work plan approved at the Regional Management Team level.
- Give us a list of current projects underway.
- Branch researchers should show up at district meetings. Get in our face, we don't have time to read anymore.
- Take more risks and give us your preliminary results, but tell us they are preliminary.
- Continue doing these kinds of interviews. Get district people involved.
- Ensure that scientists have enough time to help inform the new code and to be expert witnesses.
- Fund the research program using a formula that includes a percentage of the Ministry's budget.

3.3 Victoria-based responses regarding the Headquarters Forest Science Program

a. General satisfaction

Responses from Victoria-based interviewees regarding general satisfaction were mixed. One interviewee said they would rate their satisfaction at 3-4 on a scale of 5 and cited several good working relationships. Another said that their satisfaction level was high for the parts of the Forest Sciences Program that they worked with directly. Others admitted some level of dissatisfaction and offered suggestions for improvement.

No Victoria-based interviewee provided answers as they related to regional research teams. One regional interviewee said that their only contact with Headquarters was during Timber Supply Review and annual allowable cut determination.

b. How closely information generated from FSP meets client expectations

Opinions varied among interviewees regarding the degree that the FSP meets client expectations. There was general agreement, however, about the difficulties faced within the Ministry (i.e. reduced funding and rapid changes) that affect the ability of the Branch to meet expectations. When asked what changes within the Branch would more closely meet client expectations, responses included:

-"spend more dollars extending and applying what we already know."
-"often the depth of research is too deep so we have to adapt the results to our operations. We want help with this. Can we extrapolate the results to other areas?"
-"let universities do basic research, and have MOF do applied research that supports the operational program."
-"sometimes it seems that time and dollars are spent on research that is too narrowly focused. The results are over the heads of most people and it makes me wonder who is actually being targeted for this research. We need to think about who needs to know this information."

At the same time, there were precautions:

"Awhile ago a researcher tried to make the report applicable to management but didn't fully understand management and I don't think they had really talked to a manager. It can lead to a lengthy process regarding how the information should be applied."

One interviewee also commented that much better linkage between research and decision-making cannot be expected given budget constraints. Other respondents provided positive comments about the working relationships that existed but one added, *"I would like closer relationships."*

Some interviewees commented on the selection of research and one expressed that the choice of research topics and "who decides" is the "pithy question." Linking research to higher level strategic planning for the organization was suggested.

"We need to think about what is the grand design. When researchers end up responding to the priorities of outside funders, the result is disparate projects within our own organization."

One other general comment included:

"Too many products have not gone through peer review and are not published."

c. Ease of accessibility of information from FSP

Not all interviewees commented on accessibility but one interviewee described a need for research synthesis to make the results more useable.

"When I look into the research journals, the articles are just too esoteric and specific to be useful to me."

d. Timeliness of responses to requests for information

Most interviewees felt that timeliness was acceptable but varied by individual scientist. One person expressed concern overall.

"I am already seeing signs of substitution- we end up going elsewhere for research-based information because the timeliness isn't there and our issues fitting into their priorities isn't there."

e. Level of client reliance on FSP

Most interviewees rated the level of reliance highly, particularly in certain topical areas.

"Reliance on research? – It's strong."

"It varies by program area, but the demand for science-based decision-making is high. Right now we are weak on wildlife tree, forest health, and soils."

f. Flexibility/adaptability of FSP

More than one interviewee spoke of the "*need for more application of research.*" One described how they saw the "culture" of research and felt that scientists tend to be more responsive to the science community than to the ministry's operational information needs.

"A fair amount of it has to do with how researchers are rewarded. It's about changing an organizational culture. The way that scientists are rewarded has nothing to do with how responsive they are to operations. We need to see research more as a commodity that needs to be marketed, applied, and have a price tag."

One person expressed a belief that that cultural shifts do not occur immediately, and that the Branch can't become extension-focused overnight. Another person conceded that to attract good scientists, it is important to maintain an attractive environment for scientists."

"There is no switch to turn on and off to fix this. But we should begin to look at reward systems."

g. Credibility of FSP

In all cases, interviewees agreed on the high level of credibility of individual scientists and the reliability of the science. One interviewee spoke of occasionally needing to review the methodology of studies where the results have significant policy implications, but the credibility of the program was generally not doubted from a scientific standpoint. Another interviewee expressed concern about what they described as scientists' lack of knowledge and sensitivity about legal and administrative structures and that *"sometimes scientists appear to think that decisions should be made just on the basis of science."*

One interviewee said that they would like to know more about methodologies used, but lacks the time and has to trust their results. Sometimes members of the public criticize the choice of research topics more than the science itself, he added.

h. Importance of FSP to the mission of the Ministry of Forests

All interviewees expressed a sense of importance of the research capacity within the Ministry for the same reasons expressed by region-based interviewees. One person added, *"research is a required default. Because we have such a huge public land base, it means we have to have research to make good decisions."*

i. Suggestions for improvements

The following recommendations are listed in the words of the Victoria-based interviewees.

- Work with us. Learn more about our work. Talk to us more. Do more collaborative projects with us.
- Program managers should find champions within the ministry -- be more salesman-like and do more partnership development."
- Tell us how we can apply the results. Need more people doing synthesis.
- Give us recommendations on how results can be extrapolated. How relevant are results geographically and topically?
- Don't do work for other ministries. Other ministries are not paying the bills.
- Do more collaborative research between researchers and practitioners.
- More applied research.
- Enhance communications with other branches. Involve other branches in setting research priorities.
- More cross training so researchers have a better idea of how operations work.

- Re-instate regional research advisory committees (note: this suggestion was shared among both regional and Victoria-based interviewees).
- As people retire, begin replacing the reward system for scientists with a system that rewards them for application, not just good science.
- There needs to be some mechanism to better coordinate research in the province.

4.0 Conclusions

All interviewees expressed recognition that the tremendous shifts occurring within the forest sector and government in British Columbia will affect many roles in the provincial government. Most interviewees spoke of the new emphasis on science-based and results-based practices, and of the importance that research will and should play in the future of adaptive management of natural resources in the province. All interviewees spoke highly of the importance of the research program to the mission of the Ministry, and of the credibility of scientists and of the science itself.

There was high variability among many of the other satisfaction criteria. There does not appear to be a common experience within the regions and branches that allows for single conclusions about the level of client satisfaction of the Forest Science Program. To understand the full picture of satisfaction levels, one must burrow into the detail of the comments and suggestions.

On one extreme, district-based staff members have little exposure to research at all, while in other cases, the regional research team appears to have key roles. Satisfaction levels were higher in regions where there were personal connections with researchers. Regional researchers seemed most valued for their technical expertise in specialized topics.

It appeared that some districts are more "research-friendly" – and that may have less to do with the research teams, as the leadership philosophy and management approach within the districts. Still, the research sections may be able to help nurture the development of a research culture or "research comfort zone" within the districts through their extension efforts and partnership development with practitioners.

Victoria-based interviewees spoke frequently about need for application of science, and made strong suggestions about focusing on applied science that directly addresses ministry needs, offering some short-term or interim results, involving the

branches in research priority setting and partnership projects. All interviewees expressed a strong desire to maintain the research capacity within the Ministry to respond to new challenges of results-based code evaluations, adaptive management, and science-based approaches and that the role of research should adapt to meet these burgeoning priorities.

Both Victoria-based and region-based interviewees suggested re-instating the regional advisory committees.

Several interviewees commended the Research Branch for undertaking the study, and several suggested that these interviews be conducted in districts as well.

Recommendations for follow-up study

To collect client-satisfaction data next year, the Forest Sciences Program could consider these options:

1. Conduct interviews with the same individuals and draw comparisons. Follow-up interviews could include retrospective questions that refer to opinions about changes in satisfaction between the current year and the time of interview.

2. If numerical measures are required, conduct a full quantitative study next year and include questions that ask clients to respond retrospectively to compare "then" and "now." To do this, each question can include two scales that invite respondents to circle the answer that represents their opinion a year ago, and now. The numerical difference between the "then" and "now" scores become the measure of change.

Appendix

List of Interview Questions

1. How satisfied are you with the work of the Forest Science Program, in general? Would you say that you are very satisfied, moderately satisfied, or not at all satisfied? What evidence might you offer that suggests how satisfied your region/district/group is with the work of the Forest Science Program?

2. Overall, does the information you access from the Forest Science Program meet your expectations. What evidence might you offer that suggests that the information your region/district/group accesses meets their expectations.

3. What evidence might you give that suggests how easy it is for people in your group to access information from the Forest Science Program when they need it? Is it very easy, or difficult? How easy is it for YOU to access information when you need it? What do you think are the barriers? Why or why not?

4. When people in your group request information from the Forest Science Program, do you have the impression that they receive it in a timely manner? Have you heard anything to the contrary about this when talking to others?

5. How much do you think that people in your group rely on the Forest Science Program information to carry out their work? How much do YOU rely on it?

6. Would you say that people in your group generally feel that the Forest Science Program is flexible/adaptable enough to meet their needs? How do you know this? What do you think personally?

7. Do you personally feel that the information from the Forest Science Program is credible? What have you heard others say about it?

8. In your opinion, how important is the Forest Science Program to the overall mission of the MOF? Do you have an evidence to suggest what other people in your group think of this?

9. What do you think that the Forest Science program should be doing, that it is not currently, to better meet your needs? What do you think that they shouldn't be doing that they are currently doing?